

Beauce sends Bernier's populism packing; People's party leader trailed Conservative rival in early reporting

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People's Party of Canada Leader Maxime Bernier was headed to defeat in the Quebec riding of Beauce Monday night.

With one-third of polls reporting, Bernier was trailing Conservative Richard Lehoux by more than 2,300 votes.

Bernier won the Beauce riding for the Tories in the 2006, 2008, 2011 and 2015 elections before breaking with the party and launching his own right-wing party in September 2018.

As leader, Bernier campaigned on cutting taxes, ending corporate subsidies, drastically cutting immigration and encouraging provinces to develop their natural resources.

However, he also faced criticism from his rivals for not doing enough to weed out racists from his party and for denying there's a scientific consensus that humans are responsible for climate change.

Bernier lost to Andrew Scheer by less than two percentage points in the 2017 race for Tory leader. He attributed his loss to a concerted campaign by Quebec dairy farmers who were upset that Bernier was proposing to end the supply management system that regulates the price of eggs, dairy and poultry.

Bernier founded his own party soon after, declaring the Conservatives to be "intellectually and morally corrupt" and lacking in true conservative principles. As leader, Bernier campaigned against what he calls "extreme multiculturalism," promising to cut immigration levels and ensure new arrivals respond to Canada's economic needs.

The 56-year-old faced criticism during the campaign for tweets describing 16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg as mentally unstable, although he later softened his comments.

Late last week, the Globe and Mail reported that strategist Warren Kinsella and his firm Daisy Group were hired to "seek and destroy" Bernier's party and portray its supporters as racist.

The Globe has reported the client was the Conservatives, although Scheer has refused to confirm, deny or even acknowledge the report.

Bernier, who filed a complaint with Elections Canada over the affair, suggested that Kinsella's campaign might have had a hand in the satirical Rhinoceros party's decision to field a candidate also named Maxime Bernier in the Beauce in hopes of confusing voters.

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While Bernier ran candidates in almost every riding, his party struggled to break through and it was polling below three per cent in most opinion surveys.

Lehoux, a former dairy farmer, said last week he was running against not just Bernier, but the PPC leader's father, too. Gilles Bernier, who represented Beauce for the Progressive Conservatives from 1984 to 1993 and then as an Independent until 1997, continues to be a presence in the riding, Lehoux said.

He said voters feel pressure to stay loyal to the family. "People have a lot of respect for Gilles," Lehoux said. "But I tell them, 'I trust you - on voting day, it will be just you in the booth. No one else will know.'"

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